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Change is the Only Constant

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Change is the Only Constant¹

Because of the nature of mine-action organizations and programs, they are often placed in post-conflict areas where humanitarian work faces several obstacles. It is important to consider possible setbacks before embarking on demining in a post-conflict country.

by Zlatko Gegic [*Fondation Suisse de Déminage*]

Mine action mostly occurs in post-conflict and unstable environments. Always a turbulent period for a country, the post-conflict phase is characterized by abrupt changes and weak government institutions. In addition, a country may face a sluggish economy, fragile infrastructure, poverty, high unemployment and political instability, thereby creating a very complex situation for mine-action operations.

A realistic question might be why an organization would consider developing a mine-action program in such an unstable environment. Several reasons are fairly obvious: to prevent mine accidents or at least reduce their number; to provide immediate assistance to victims of explosive remnants of war; to begin building the foundation for economic and social recovery; and to provide assistance to and resettlement for refugees and internally displaced persons. While one might assume that the governments of mine-affected countries, having the strongest interest in mine action, would provide whatever is necessary to execute mine-action activities, the reality, unfortunately, is often otherwise.

Political Instability

Conditions such as armed clashes² and insurgencies³ can result in the termination of activities and mine-action programs. A significant number of disillusioned ex-soldiers and armed insurgents will often resort to criminal activities and general banditry.⁴ Though unilateral support from the host country for humanitarian organizations would provide the best foundation for mine-action activities, post-conflict governments are often torn apart

by rampant political corruption and are unable to address their country's issues or provide the necessary support to those organizations operating in their country. As a result, mine-action organizations are often left to develop the programs and provide assistance with little or no cooperation from the local governments.

Logistical Concerns

The challenges mine-action programs face in complex situations are enormous, including providing protection for personnel and assets, complex logistics, restricted movement, continual changes in deployment plans, and obstacles preventing removal of ERW in the field. These problems are persistent for those working in countries such as Afghanistan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sri Lanka and Sudan, to name a few.

Economic Difficulties

Despite post-conflict government declaratives and a genuine enthusiasm to assist with mine-action activities, many governments do not have the financial or organizational ability to assist with mine-action operations. This limitation often puts a strain on the finances of mine-action organizations operating in post-conflict countries. Organizations may find they are unable to access task sites, and that their field staff need additional protection, usually in a form of an armed escort. However, the organizations usually have to endure all costs related to this protection, such as fuel, food, daily wages and transport. In the case of *Fondation Suisse de Déminage* program in Burundi, assistance the authorities offered was in the form of



Adrien Buhire, an FSD deminer, points to a hole in his truck caused by the bullet that wounded him during an attack on the FSD convoy in Burundi (March 2008).

PHOTO COURTESY OF ZLATKO GEGIC

a few indifferent, poorly equipped and unpaid police officers provided as armed escorts. Furthermore, the police officers were suddenly withdrawn when the local government felt their assistance was required elsewhere. Nevertheless, tasks need to be completed and deadlines met. While mine-action organizations may be able to afford these additional short-term burdens on their budgets and staff, these programs can rarely afford to provide such substantial assistance for extended periods of time.

Additional Considerations

Mine-action organizations must juggle the program's goals and the donor's requirements with the reality of the situation on the ground. Program strategies, especially proposals for mine-action activities, are written assuming the work will be carried out in a relatively stable situation and are often based on the assumption of minimum costs, sometimes with unrealistic goals, deadlines and financial requirements, in order to win a bid or secure funding. In addition to bureaucratic issues, mine-action organiza-

tions must take a country's specific security issues and insurgency constraints, as well as the ethnic and religious background of national staff, into consideration.

In teams of mixed nationalities, organizations will face challenges regarding supervisory issues. For example, organizations must consider the implications of sending mine-action teams composed primarily of Muslims to work in a Serbian (Christian)-dominated area in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or Shiites and Sunnis to work in religious conflict zones in Iraq. Additional limiting factors include the restrictions placed by donors on the use of funds, the type of intervention used (mine-risk education versus ERW clearance), and the prioritization of mine-action tasks. This prioritization is especially limiting when United Nations Mine Action Centers cater to the host country's wishes, often overlooking humanitarian mine-action interests, and when the corruption and ethical structure of national mine-action authorities manipulate task prioritization on the basis of ethnic bias, further exacerbating an already difficult situation.

Conclusion

Post-conflict areas are generally unstable and require mine action to help return to normalcy. One can be certain that sudden, unpredictable changes are the only constants in this industry. The only way to help an organization cope with these complex situations is to carefully perform a pre-program analysis that sets realistic goals, deadlines and methods of evaluation. Furthermore, in choosing individuals with experience managing mine-action activities in post-conflict environments, organizations can increase the success of a mine-action program. Ultimately, organizations must learn to consider the lack of host-government support coupled with sudden and unpredictable change and work to avert these pitfalls, thereby helping to ensure the effective transition from a post-conflict situation to one of stability and safety. ♦

See Endnotes, Page 77



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